

Understanding the Role of Community Collaboration Within Indigenous Cultural Heritage Data Migrations

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ABSTRACT

Many museums and archives globally hold heritage items belonging to Indigenous peoples of North America. There are current efforts to begin decolonizing the practices and legacies of these collections, and one way this is done is through digital access to Indigenous cultural heritage. This poster examines The Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC) Knowledge Sharing System, a digital platform that aggregates museum and archival records into a centralized database at a point of data migration. Data migrations are not only necessary as a point for technical updates, but also for theoretical changes in the system itself as the needs of its users change. This is the case for the knowledge sharing system as it moves from a password protected system to one that is open to the public. Rooted in qualitative research from semi-structured interviews with the creators, maintainers, and users of the database, this poster illustrates how GRASAC is working to meet the needs of their user community, and what unique challenges are faced when prioritizing Indigenous knowledge within a database created for western information organization.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous data practices; Data migration; Community collaboration; Platform design.

INTRODUCTION

This poster identifies and unpacks points of negotiation within The Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts & Cultures (GRASAC) Knowledge Sharing database. GRASAC is a research alliance that hosts a database that aggregates records from museum collections belonging to Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region (Bohaker et al., 2015) and is currently undergoing a migration from password protection to a system that is open to the public. This change within the database brings to the surface some of the needs that the unique cultural data held within the system has, along with additional desires from users, many of whom are Indigenous. This research seeks to understand how negotiations are resolved and embodied within the sites of contestation in the infrastructure development of the GRASAC Knowledge Sharing System.

BACKGROUND

Many museums and memory institutions hold ethnographic collections, or material about or belonging to Indigenous people. Museums are institutions with colonial legacies, and for much of their history the goals of their collections were not to preserve knowledge for Indigenous communities, but for settlers' own agendas pertaining to Indigenous peoples including research, government organization, and land control. Some institutions that manage these collections are now realizing the need to share their collections and its knowledge with the original communities, and are making efforts to do this, often through online portals, digital archives, or other digital platforms. These are sometimes aggregated data sets that include multiple museum collections, or a single institution's own online platform. This is not a straightforward process though, as the needs of the Indigenous communities must be centered as a priority, and often western systems of archiving, organization, standardization, and cataloging are not equipped to handle this.

The theoretical framing of this research draws from interpretivist work in overlapping information fields including information organization, museum studies, and feminist and Indigenous data practices (Leavy and Harris 2019; Wemigwans 2018; Wilson 2008). Rooted in qualitative research from semi-structured interviews with the creators, maintainers, contributors, and users of the database, this research presents GRASAC as a case study to understand the motivations behind changes to their database. The knowledge sharing system currently holds two types of records: language items and heritage items. Language items are words and phrases from Indigenous languages (Anishinaabe and Cayuga are the languages with the most entries currently) that can be attached to a heritage item to describe it (Willmott et al. 2016), or used independently for language revitalization purposes. This poster is focusing on changes to heritage items specifically, which are generally objects in museum collections and archival material.

PASSWORD PROTECTED

One of the biggest points of negotiation within the database that was discussed during the interviews is the move from a password protected to a public facing system. The desire for a system without the obstacle of logging in is something that has been expressed by users, particularly Indigenous users, for many years. One reason is because the database does not currently hold any sensitive information that should not be shared with the general public. However, museum politics around open access made this challenging. At the inception of GRASAC, many museums were concerned about copyright issues with having images of their collections fully accessible on the web and were not willing to aggregate if there wasn't a password protecting their data. This in particular is an example of the continued colonial legacies of museum collections, that even though they were willing to share their data with GRASAC, they were still inadvertently placing controls on how records were being shared with Indigenous communities. As opinions around access have changed in the museum context, decision makers in GRASAC now feel as if they can meet this need of their users. One participant, who had been involved in the research alliance since its founding, described why the password was necessary to begin with, and how changing politics in both museums and within Indigenous communities have required them to rethink this policy. They stated, "We put the password on in response to museum concerns...to try to limit the circulation of images and data. And now museums as institutions have moved past that set of concerns. And it no longer seems necessary or relevant. And Indigenous communities are saying loud and clear, 'the password is a barrier, we should not have to ask for a password.'" For this research alliance, collaboration means working with Indigenous communities, but also with the museums who hold these heritage items. The knowledge sharing system has been around for almost 20 years, and it is important to understand that these long-lasting databases need to evaluate not only how to sustain themselves technically, but also be open to change as politics change within museums and Indigenous communities.

DATA STANDARDIZATION

Another negotiation in the knowledge sharing system is metadata standardization within heritage items. The maintainers of the database never implemented any controlled vocabulary or dictionary to guide the metadata of a heritage item. A team of researchers complete each record and can add multiple photos, sound recordings, and extensive documentation to a heritage item. Describing this thought process, one of the maintainers of the knowledge sharing system stated, "We actually had quite a lot of discussion about whether we would use Getty, or what other standards we would use. And none of them were adequate. We see a lot of problems in them, their different typologies and schemas. How museum catalogs describe material heritage culture. So we thought, well let's just see what people enter." This approach allowed robust information to be documented in a record but has also led to standardization problems within the data. This makes searching the knowledge sharing system complicated, especially for non-academic users. One example that came up in multiple interviews is that the word 'moccasin' is spelled 4 different ways in the database. This means when a user searches for the word spelled one way, the other 3 spellings don't appear in the search results. With the move to a public facing platform, members of GRASAC are reconsidering how to balance the desire for researchers to have some freedom and multiplicity in documenting a heritage item, but also how to make the knowledge stored within an item findable by a wider variety of users. This includes users who might be using search terms more relevant to their community and experiences but might not necessarily be academic or research oriented. Unlike the previously mentioned decision to move away from a password, this is an ongoing process that will require extensive data curation to fix and the maintainers of GRASAC are still trying to conceptualize the best way to accomplish this.

CONCLUSION

This poster disseminates some of the processes and decisions that GRASAC has recently implemented in order to continue meeting the needs of the members of their research alliance and users of their knowledge sharing system. Documenting these changes can pave the way for other collections holding similar cultural heritage material to question what more they could be accomplishing and how to best do so, while also acknowledging the change a system can undergo through time in order to meet the changing needs of a community. It also spotlights a research database that has successfully met the needs of Indigenous communities through respectful and reciprocal practices and what can be learned from them.

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